

Homer: the first jazz musician?

Howard Peacock

Most scholars accept that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* represent the culmination of a long-standing tradition of poetry transmitted orally from one bard to the next, generated by interweaving traditional themes, phrases, and ‘set piece’ scenes which would have been memorized in advance, but which the skilful poet could alter to meet the demands of the individual narrative. What is less often noticed is that the very same interplay of memorized ‘formulae’, adaptation, and improvisation is found in modern jazz music. As Howard Peacock demonstrates, the comparison between Homeric poetry and jazz is not merely interesting; it also offers valuable insights into the ways Homeric bards might have learnt their craft, and into how genuine originality is possible in such a traditional framework.

Homeric formulae

Homeric epic is strictly metrical: each line of the poem conforms to a scheme of acceptable combinations of long and short syllables. For example, a line may start with two long syllables, or a ‘long’ followed by two ‘shorts’, but never with a short–long–short pattern. The descriptions (or ‘epithets’) applied to characters in the Homeric poems are used partly because they provide fragments of verse which ‘fit’ into particular sections of this metrical system. The description ‘long-suffering godlike Odysseus’ (*polutlas dīos Odusseus*) conveniently gives a fragment which exactly fits the requirements of the second half of a line – no wonder then that this phrase is used 33 times in the *Odyssey*. Similarly, part of the reason why both Odysseus and Achilles so often get to be ‘godlike’ (*dīos*) is that the phrases *dī-os O-dus-seus* and *dī-os A-chil-leus* exactly fit the long–short–short–long–long metrical pattern which is the standard close of a line of epic verse.

Jazz has its ‘formulae’ as well: memorized melodic fragments or ‘shapes’ which provide material from which to construct an improvised solo. (Musicians refer to this as ‘jazz language’.) What is distinctive about these fragments is their vast potential for re-use and recombination: the same fragment of melody from jazz language can be incorporated into longer melodic phrases in a wide variety of musical contexts. One such melodic fragment

is so omnipresent in jazz that it is known simply by the name ‘the lick’ (see p. 2): you can view a YouTube compilation of its uses at <http://tinyurl.com/jazzlick>.

The Homeric formulae permit similar creativity: as in jazz, one repeated element can be used in many different contexts, with the familiarity of the wording introducing associations which lend depth to the description. A case in point is the word *nēpios* (or in the vocative, *nēpie*), ‘fool’. The distinctive long–short–short syllable pattern renders it suitable to begin a Homeric line, and in the *Iliad* it is used that way 17 times. By the time Achilles, exulting over the dying Hector, calls him *nēpie* for having thought himself safe on the battlefield (22.333), the audience has heard the same word used by Hector when glorying over Achilles’ closest friend Patroclus, whom Hector has just killed: ‘Patroclus, you thought you would sack our city, and take the day of freedom from the women of Troy, and take them in your ships to your dear native land, fool’ (16.832–3); before that the narrator had called Patroclus *nēpios* for pursuing the fleeing Trojans, when holding back would have saved his own life (16.685); the word is also used to describe several other minor heroes whose over-confidence spells their doom. The repeated uses of this word in different contexts establishes it as a particular kind of foolishness – overconfidence leading to tactical folly in battle – something which gives an extra grim irony to the fact that the Trojan

Polydamas who wisely counselled retreat inside the city walls after the death of Patroclus had been called *nēpie* by Hector himself (18.295).

The narrative framework

It is rare for jazz to be played entirely ‘free’: most improvisation takes place over a fixed harmonic framework. This repeated sequence of chords (known as ‘the changes’) provides a backdrop against which soloists’ melodies make sense to the audience. Improvisers may follow these changes, using formulae which outline them, or seek to generate melodic lines which do not clash with the underlying harmony; alternatively, they can generate tension by implying a *different* harmony from that played by the rest of the band. Chord sequences may be recycled to form the basis of new compositions: countless jazz pieces are based on the ‘rhythm changes’ of Cole Porter’s *I Got Rhythm*, and the bebop tune *Donna Lee* is in turn based on the ‘changes’ of the earlier standard *Indiana*. Moreover, jazz performances usually adhere to a set of structural conventions: for example, that the ‘head’ (melody) of the original tune should be played at the start and end of the performance, and that drum and bass solos come towards the end of the piece (if at all).

Parallel features can be found in Homer. On the level of structural conventions, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* share an opening pattern featuring an invocation of the Muse and announcement of the poem’s theme; in both, dialogue is quoted directly rather than as reported speech; in both, the narrator usually refrains from explicit moral judgement about the characters’ actions. Further, it is clear that *Iliad* and *Odyssey* present stories taken from a wider narrative (the so-called ‘epic cycle’) which fixes certain unalterable events, the closest parallel to the ‘changes’ underlying a jazz improvisation. There must be a war at Troy; Troy must fall to the Greeks; Achilles must be killed before that happens. The poet’s skill is in shaping the poem to respond to these fixed points in the story, just as the jazz musician’s skill lies in shaping a melody which responds to the underlying chord sequence.



Jazz language is composed of licks: melodic fragments which can be re-used in many different settings: transposed to start on the appropriate root note, the 'bebop lick' can be used over any dominant seventh chord (G7, C7, F7 etc.); transposed to begin a perfect fourth above the root of the chord, it can be used over any minor seventh chord. Courtesy of Howard Peacock.

Although Achilles is already speaking of himself as 'doomed to a short life' in the first book of the *Iliad* (1.352), it is not until book 9 that he reveals that his short life is bound up with the decision to stay and fight at Troy, winning undying glory, rather than return home to a long, peaceful, but inglorious life (9.410–15). Only with Hector's prophetic dying words is it revealed where and by whom Achilles will actually be killed: by Paris, with Apollo's help, at the Scaean gates of Troy (22.359–60). The events of the 'epic cycle' might provide fixed points, but Homer's presentation of those lends depth and subtlety to the narrative. After all, Achilles is still alive when the *Iliad* ends, so the poet does not have to mention his fate; the complex foreshadowings of his death serve to bring out the significance of what Achilles does while alive.

Orality and memory

The original Homeric tradition was probably not stored or transmitted through written text: instead, a poem would have to be memorized to be preserved for the future, and be recited orally to be transmitted from one bard to another. Jazz helps us to understand how this process of memorization would have formed part of the bard's training: an essential part of jazz education is transcribing recorded solos by ear, and committing these solos to memory through playing along with the recording. Students are expected to commit hundreds of solos to memory in the course of building their knowledge of 'jazz language'. In performance, musicians will incorporate sections of previously learned solos or compositions (even non-jazz compositions) for stretches of several bars at a time, in a practice known as 'quoting'. The saxophonist Charlie Parker was a prolific quoter of Stravinsky, on one occasion incorporating the opening of Stravinsky's 'Firebird Suite' into a solo when the composer himself was in the audience, to Stravinsky's evident delight.

Just as jazz musicians learn complete solos to perfect their craft, it seems that Homeric bards would commit entire 'set piece' scenes to memory. One such example is the description of the meal that

Achilles and Priam share immediately after Achilles has agreed to ransom Hector's body to the Trojans (*Iliad* 24. 621–31, in Robert Fagles's translation):

*Never pausing, the swift runner
sprang to his feet
And slaughtered a whole sheep as
comrades moved in
To skin the carcass quickly, dress
the quarters well.
Expertly they cut the meat in
pieces, pierced them with spits,
roasted them to a turn and pulled
them off the fire.
Automedon brought the bread, set
it out on the board
in ample wicker baskets. Achilles
served the meat.
They reached out for the good
things that lay at hand
and when they had put aside
desire for food and drink
Priam the son of Dardanus gazed
at Achilles, marveling*

Here the central six lines are recycled from other eating scenes in the *Iliad*: the couplet describing the cutting and roasting of the meat repeats *Iliad* 7.317–18; the section dealing with the bread and baskets is also found at *Iliad* 9.216–17 (with Patroclus instead of Automedon doing the serving); while the description of the eating itself is found twice in *Iliad* 9 (9.91–2, 221–2), and the line that concludes it ('and when they had put aside desire for food and drink') seems to be a standard ending to an eating scene in both the *Iliad* (where it is used seven times) and *Odyssey* (where it appears fifteen times). It seems that the Homeric bard would learn these lines as parts of 'conventional scenes' which could be re-used as the poem required, just as a jazz soloist learns a complete solo in order to recycle elements of it in future. In context here, though, the 'conventional' nature of the description adds to its impact: it marks the (temporary) return to social normality after the violent rupture caused by Achilles' mistreatment of Hector's corpse, something of which (the poet makes clear) even the gods disapproved.

Conclusion: creativity and originality

Students of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have to

grapple with the 'Homeric Question': can any one bard be identified as the author of the poems? At one extreme, so-called 'analysts' emphasize the traditional nature of the composition, suggesting that the poem was built up in stages by successively expanding earlier, shorter versions. In the analyst tradition, it is a mistake to call any one poet in the tradition 'Homer', since the poems preserve the work of many different independent bards. Alternatively, 'unitarians' claim that the overall narrative structure of the poems is so sophisticated that it can only be the work of one master poet, who used the resources of the oral tradition, but imposed enough originality on the whole to deserve the title of *the* author of the poem. The parallels between jazz improvisation and Homeric poetry support this unitarian view: just like Homer, the improvising jazz musician is drawing on a long-standing performance tradition, using repeated formulaic elements drawn from the work of previous musicians to construct a solo. As much as three quarters of a jazz solo might recycle melodic material drawn from the traditional resources of the discipline. Yet somehow the end result is always something new and original, expressing the distinctive musical personality of the player. If that can be true for jazz performances, then it could be true of Homer as well: a poet who mastered the formulaic resources of the oral tradition and used them to create original works of breathtaking scale and sophistication.

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